

Using Enquiry Based Learning to unpack photographs

At the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, we look at memories, that have been recorded and represented in our permanent exhibition, in order to learn about genocide in the 20th century as well as about ourselves and our society today through dialogue and discussion.

One of the ways to encourage this is through an active learning experience known as Enquiry Based Learning. This is a student focused method of learning where students are encouraged to explore the exhibition, ask questions and share ideas, in contrast to more traditional approaches which rely on the teacher providing all the knowledge and information.

The benefit of this methodology is that it allows students to practise critical thinking skills: like close observation; distinguishing between facts, opinions and assumptions; the articulation and sharing of their ideas as well as listening to the ideas of others. As guides, we are able to share new information with the students during the discussion; adding to and deepening their knowledge and understanding of history.

With this in mind, the education team and guides at the JHGC encourage students to engage with the case studies and connect to individual stories through a variety of access points like artwork, written or recorded testimony, artefacts, photography, architecture, music, poetry and so on. We also provide examples of role models to motivate students to be

active voices in their families and communities.

The photographs of xenophobic violence in South Africa by South African photojournalists, Alon Skuy and James Oatway, is one of the many opportunities, throughout the exhibition, to initiate such conversations.

To initiate discussion we start with questions like: *What do you see? Which of these images are you drawn to?* and *What else?* This demonstrates that there is not only one possible answer to these questions and that the guide is genuinely interested to hear their thoughts and opinions. It is also a way to motivate those that might not usually offer answers to contribute to the discussion.

The guide can then use follow up questions, the purpose of which is to encourage the students to clarify their thoughts; *Why? Tell me more?* Or to distinguish between a fact, an opinion and an assumption; *Is this always the case? Give me some examples?* This provides an opportunity to explore stereotypes and 'othering' in our own communities, families and schools.

Many times, xenophobic violence, and violent acts in general, involve various role players; perpetrators, victims, bystanders, upstanders and rescuers. We can use the photograph of the attack on Emmanuel Sithole in 2015, to look at these various role players. Students easily identify and tend to focus on the perpetrator and victim that are in the centre of the image.

When they are asked what choices they think the men in the background are making, it is an opportunity to link to previous discussions on the role of bystanders during the Holocaust and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Together, we are able to analyse their possible motivations, including fear and indifference, as well as acknowledge that their inaction never benefits the victim. This is also an opportunity to open up a discussion on the role of the photographer and to acknowledge the blurred line between collaborator, bystander and upstander. The aim is not to find definitive answers but to prompt questions and reflection and, hopefully, a shift in perception.

The second photograph, of a man holding a South African identity document in the centre of a mob (2017), can be used to make connections between the challenges faced by refugees in South Africa and all over the world today, as well as connecting to the centre's two case studies of genocide. It is pertinent to note that the words of Dorothy Thompson, an influential American journalist are as relevant today as they were in 1938:

"It is a fantastic commentary on the inhumanity of our times that for thousands and thousands of people a piece of paper with a stamp on it is the difference between life and death".

Finally, we ask the students what role these images play within a centre focusing on genocide and what are the implications for us today?

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Photographs by James Oatway

